

<p><b><i>Killam Research Application</i></b></p>
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[Excerpts from the application submitted by **H. S. Harris** on 19 June 1990 for a Canada Council Killam Research fellowship for the writing of **Hegel's Ladder**. [2 volumes; Hackett 1997]. Items in square brackets added by transcriber.]

***Title of Project:***

“Hegel’s Ladder: A Literal commentary on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*”

***Discipline(s)***

Philosophy, Intellectual history

***Summary of Project***

In his first major published book, **Phenomenology of Spirit** (1807), Hegel claimed to be providing both the “introduction” to his “system of speculative philosophy” and its “first part”. Discussion and controversy about this claim has not ceased since the book appeared; and the prevailing opinion at the present time is that, with respect to the “system” that Hegel published some twenty years later as the **Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences**, neither claim retains any validity.

In spite of this general belief, interest in the **Phenomenology** has never flagged entirely; and since the revolutionary studies of Alexandre Kojève in the 1930’s Hegel’s first systematic work has received more attention (outside of Germany) than the later “encyclopaedic” texts that he published during the Berlin years. There is now quite a long shelf of books about the **Phenomenology** in English. But it has never been studied as a “systematic” work on its own terms. (The project is sometimes taken seriously and expounded sensibly; but even then, the expositor agrees that it is not successfully carried out in the body of the book).

For many years (since 1964 to be precise) I have been preparing to write a “literal commentary” – i.e. an explanation of Hegel’s text, paragraph by paragraph and where necessary sentence by sentence. With this in mind, I went back to the surviving documents of Hegel’s intellectual formation (which form a considerable body of texts published for the most part only in this century); and I have already written a two-volume work on **Hegel’s Development** (Oxford, 1970, 1989).

The **Phenomenology** purports to be a “science of the experience of consciousness”; so in my view the “experience” of its author must provide the key to its proper understanding. I have been working upon this hypothesis since 1983; and I am now convinced that I can show that although Hegel’s execution of his project is uneven, the belief that he was unsuccessful is mistaken. The students who hold this view have simply failed to comprehend his argument in detail. I intend to produce another two-volume work which will explain how Hegel used the knowledge of the human cultural record that he actually had to generate the concept of “philosophical thinking” that is the necessary beginning-point of his **Science of Logic**; and since that retained its authoritative status in the Berlin

years it will follow that the general consensus about the “superannuation” of the **Phenomenology** in Hegel’s Berlin system is mistaken.

### *Scope and Objective*

As stated in my “Summary” I intend to produce a “literal commentary” on the **Phenomenology**. Although there are many commentaries on this work, only a few of them have attempted to provide a literal account of what Hegel says; and those that do this are usually so “literal” as to be almost useless. They merely paraphrase what Hegel says, repeating in large part the very language in which he says it – an example of this is provided by the 700 page **Analytischer Kommentar zu Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes** (Freiburg/Munich, Alber, 1980) by Claus-Artur Scheier. My aim is to explain what Hegel says both logically and empirically, and as far as possible in the normal colloquial English of writers like Bertrand Russell and Gilbert Ryle.

My commentary will be at two levels. For each paragraph of the text I shall provide first a short “analysis of the argument”, and secondly I shall give the fullest and clearest discussion that I can provide of what the “analysis” means, and of all the difficulties, implicit allusions, and problems that are present in Hegel’s text but not in my analytical summary.

### *Relationship to existing literature*

The idea of this double approach was born when two Anglophone scholars published “analyses” of the text which both failed (in my opinion) but in rather different ways. The “analysis” published by the late J. M. Findlay in the Arnold Miller translation of the text [Oxford, 1977], has the great merit of proceeding paragraph by paragraph. But this only enables us to see how frequently it is **not** a summary of Hegel’s argument, but the substitution of an argument that makes better sense to J.N. Findlay. While on the other hand, the somewhat longer “analysis” published in two volumes by Howard Kainz [I. Alabama, 1976, reprint Athens, Ohio, 1988 and II. Athens, Ohio, 1983] does **not** proceed paragraph by paragraph, but offers a general summary of the argument stage by stage. Here, we usually cannot decide where Kainz is right, and where wrong, because it is so difficult to tell what passage in Hegel’s text he is “analysing” in any given sentence. His “analysis” is a paradigm case of the typical fault of almost all of the discussions of Hegel’s text in English – even the lengthiest. The author usually manages to get from Hegel’s more straightforward assertions, a general idea of what he is seeking to show at each stage. (S)he then develops and expounds that general idea without attempting to follow Hegel’s own argument in detail at all. (Only Father Quentin Lauer’s **A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit** (New York, 1976) is saved from this fault, by its pattern of frequent quotations. But it is easy to show that like Findlay – though not so radically – Lauer is frequently guilty of substituting for Hegel’s own argument, another one which he finds more intelligible and acceptable.)

Many writers have followed Kojève, expounding the “experience of consciousness” in terms of their own post-Hegelian view of where human culture is going (and of what

makes it go). There is no reason why this should not be done, and every reason to expect that it will continue to be done. I hope to make interpretations of this kind easier and better. But the best “commentary” of the “literal” kind that we have at present is that of Jean Hyppolite, which appeared nearly fifty years ago [Paris, 1946]. He did good work on the logical structure of Hegel’s “Science of experience”; but he did not have all the knowledge that we now possess of the “experience” that went into Hegel’s synthesis; and his detailed interpretation frequently goes astray because he accepted supposed “insights” and impressions that have become traditional, but are demonstrably mistaken.

It would be foolish to suppose that I can altogether avoid mistakes of these two kinds (the logical type that I have ascribed to Findlay and Lauer and the material errors of Hyppolite). But my method of approach – partially illustrated by the “analytical” efforts of Findlay and Lauer, but consciously inspired by my sketchy knowledge of the “short” and “long” commentaries on the works of Aristotle and Averroës – will at least guarantee that my mistakes can be clearly identified and securely demonstrated as our understanding of the text advances. The height of my ambition is to put the critical study of Hegel’s text upon a new footing for the future, and to make it impossible for anyone who wishes to be taken seriously to substitute their own general ideas and impressions for the careful and detailed examination of Hegel’s actual text.

If I can do **that** then we have some reason to hope that in future our discussions of Hegel will be a little more like our discussions of Descartes and Hume – full of discords that are fruitful because they rest upon a firm, and slowly increasing, body of shared understanding.

The existing situation – in which every student tends to go in a different direction, and there are several “schools” of interpretation (each based on a different shared consensus) does clearly show appallingly difficult Hegel’s text is to comprehend. The basic problem was trenchantly stated in the conclusion reached by Rudolf Haym in 1857. He said that we find in the **Phenomenology** the combination of a “transcendental-psychological proof” (of the reality of absolute cognition) with an “historical proof”; and he argued that the two cannot be put together. According to his italicized verdict: “the **Phenomenology** is a psychology brought to confusion and disorder by history, and a history brought to ruin by psychology” (**Hegel und seine Zeit**, 1857, p. 243). The main “schools” have both agreed with him, and have developed either the “transcendental proof” or the “historical proof”. My aim is to show how the two sides are put together by Hegel himself.

### *The basic hypothesis*

According to my reading “transcendental psychology” and “history” go hand in hand at every stage in Hegel’s theory. In the first half of the book – which divides logically when the **Volk** is introduced as the substantial bearer of the Spirit in the middle of Chapter V -

it is the “transcendental concept” that is in the limelight. In the second half of the book, it is the historical evolution of that concept that is most evident. (In my commentary one volume will be devoted to each of these topics: “I. The Pilgrimage of Reason” and “II. The Odyssey of Spirit”). But at every stage “concept” and “experience” are combined in an **actual** unity. According to Hegel’s basic thesis, a scientific concept of human **experience** is now (1807) “possible” because it has been fully **actualized**. His “Science” is the logical comprehension of what has actually happened in our cultural history. We do not have a clear comprehension of what it means to be scientific knowers, and of how the different modes of our experience must always continue to be oriented in order to be “scientific” (“truly human” is the practical synonym for the theoretical word “scientific” here). Experience must, of course, continue to be forever **novel**. But however it may perpetually refill, and continually enrich, the concept of absolute knowing at which Hegel’s argument arrives, it can only **overthrow** that concept in a regressive way. We can pass on away from the point of arrival only by going back to some recognizable earlier stage in the evolution of this final concept of philosophical Reason as the **self-knowledge** of our natural and cultural **world**.

### *The form and progress of Hegel’s argument*

Hegel’s method of demonstrating this conclusion is to show us how our own concept of ourselves as cognitively experiencing “the world” passes through a series of expanding circles which after becoming the circle of experience of our scientific, historical and religious community, closes back finally upon the moment of the sensible certainty of being now here in the world from which we began. The first of Hegel’s main circles is that in which we progress from the pre-philosophical awareness of our world of nameable objects to the scientific (but ahistorical) concept of the infinite “order of nature”. From this we move first to the **history** of how the knowing self became capable of comprehending this eternal order of nature as the **stage** upon which its own free self-expression takes place. Here we go through the crucial historical cycle from the establishment of the Roman Empire to the publication of Fichte’s **Wissenschaftslehre** [1794] for the first time. Chapter IV (Self-consciousness) ends with the “Unhappy Consciousness” of the individual soul that knows it is inevitably sinful and can be saved only by the grace of a transcendent Reason, because that is the fundamental truth about singular consciousness. Our belief that “Reason” is our “nature” as individual consciousness is mistaken. “Reason as Observation” makes that discovery.

**Rational** consciousness is founded upon and implicit in the **substantial**, legally organized, community that educates us to become rational individuals. So in the next great logical movement of the concept, Hegel traces the evolution of “law” to “moral law”. The inevitability of universal condemnation under any moral law, takes us finally to the religious standpoint; and just as the evolution of law took us back one stage from the Roman Empire to the Greek world, so the evolution of the concept of humanity as “God’s family” takes us back another stage to the dawn of monotheism in ancient Persia. But always it is the concept of the philosopher as the universally individuated consciousness of human experience that is evolving. So the final stage of the

phenomenology of “absolute knowing” is the recognition that the consciousness ascribed to “God” is actually the consciousness that we ourselves **must** have if we are to embark upon the systematic exposition of our human experience in a logical “science” that is shared (or shareable) by all of us.

Of course we do not have this consciousness in the same way that the religious believers ascribe it to God. But our final move to “absolute knowing” puts us in a position to expound how we **do** have it. Also we can finally comprehend why **unbelief** (or a different belief) must always be an open option in the religious sphere. As long as we understand the universal concept of our human community within the natural order of space **and** time that makes “absolute knowing” possible (a concept which is as much practical in its import as it is theoretical) the question of whether we are “believers” or “unbelievers” becomes superfluous. We should never have achieved the standpoint of “absolute knowing” in our culture without the communal experience of the Christian Faith. But now that the “scientific” standpoint has been reached, a Buddhist or a Marxist can share it just as readily as a Catholic or a Lutheran.

### *Strategy and method of the commentary*

To give this sort of summary of Hegel’s argument is relatively easy. But as far as I know, no one has put the argument together quite like this before; and one reason for this is that the opening **Gestalt** of “Sensible Certainty” has not been generally recognized as the pre-philosophical standpoint of common sense, exemplified by the peasant-woman in one of Hegel’s notebooks who can name all her cows, along with her children and her deceased brother. The most distinctive feature of my project is my intention to identify the actual **Gestalten** of consciousness at every stage. Where possible, I shall try to name the actual case that Hegel had in mind – or at least the sources in which the relevant class of cases can be found. But Hegel himself chose to make a mystery out of this, and often we can see that this was either because he did not **know** enough himself to choose a specific model, or because he wanted us to be aware that the **Gestalten** can be exemplified in different ways under different circumstances. According to his ideal of “Science” every one of the **Gestalten** of experience is permanently necessary. One of the mistakes that bedevils much of the critical and interpretative literature, is the failure to understand that every “position of consciousness” can effectively defend itself against all attacks. Hegel’s criticism is not **destructive**. Every stage is a circle that closes upon itself. The “necessity” to move on exists only for the consciousness that begins with a certain ideal of “logical satisfaction”. At every stage one can take one’s stand, and refuse to move. Thus, the fact that consciousness **actually has moved** in history is an essential part of Hegel’s “proof”. Of course motion by itself proves nothing, because it may be regressive – and Hegel sometimes points out how a regressive movement could naturally occur at a given point. The essential element in his own proof is his demonstration that some actual movement is a **progression**, i.e. an enrichment of the concept of “absolute truth” maintained in the previous stage, and one that comes about through the process of “determinate negation”, so that nothing comprehended by the previous concept is ever lost.

For this reason the logical transitions from stage to stage must be exhibited as carefully and thoroughly as possible. Even the best existing commentaries fail to do this adequately; and many do not attempt it – or make a joke of it – because they find the transitions inherently implausible. One of the main virtues that I claim for my essentially empirical (or historical) approach is that I can show (at least) why Hegel felt that his logical transitions were plausible, and why he believed that they were indeed logical (and hence “necessary”).

### *Significance of results*

My thumbnail account of the argument has already made clear how the **Phenomenology** is a necessary **introduction** for speculative philosophy. But my approach will also clarify the more controversial question of how the “science of experience” is itself the **first part** of the system of philosophical knowledge. In order to lay out the evolutionary logic of the concept of cognitive experience, Hegel must cover the whole range of speculative philosophy – since all of it necessarily falls **within** experience. So the “science of experience” is **coordinate** with “the system as such”. Moreover, it is coordinate in one way with “the system of logic” and in another way with “real philosophy”; so I do not myself know whether to say that there are **two** or **three** coordinate “parts” to Hegel’s philosophy. (I shall leave that question to others, though I prefer the answer **three**, because I believe that the logic of experience is what guides us in the separation of the “logical” from the “real”.)

What I am certain of in any case is that the encyclopaedic system of the Berlin years cannot dispense with the **Phenomenology** (which was an essential preamble for the **Science of Logic**, 1812-16) without ceasing to be the working organon of world-interpretation that it was meant to be, and becoming a “neo-Platonic fantasy” – to borrow a phrase from one of its most trenchant critics. The historic record shows, when we examine it carefully, that Hegel knew this; and once his own academic position was secure, he turned back to revise not only the **Science of Logic** (which is politically neutral) but the **Phenomenology** (which is full of political dynamite). He foresaw, therefore, that he would have to introduce the new edition of the **Phenomenology** with a diplomatic apology referring to its origins in an “earlier time”. But he embarked on the revision anyway. The acceptance of the risk involved can only be accounted for by the hypothesis that Hegel knew it to be **necessary**. He knew (for example) that what is incorporated in the **Encyclopaedia** under the heading “Phenomenology” is only the outline of the phenomenology of individual consciousness – i.e. what will be covered in my first volume. But without the comprehension of how the social substance comes to consciousness in the philosophical subject (the topic of my second volume) no one can do philosophical logic scientifically – i.e. creatively and with a clear comprehension of what one is doing.

One can **learn** the Hegelian logic – that is what the **Encyclopaedia Logic** was for. And one can even learn to apply it – Hegel’s lectures on Real Philosophy and on Absolute Spirit offered good models for that. But one cannot learn Hegelian logic **as a**

**philosopher** from the **Encyclopaedia**. One is more likely to learn and apply it with a radically false consciousness of what one is doing. The great majority of Hegel's students, including some of his most notable critics (Kierkegaard and Marx, for example) did just that. In the case of Marx – with whom I can very appropriately close – the study of the encyclopaedic “system” in this false perspective effectively distorted his very real appreciation of the **Phenomenology**. There could not be a more vivid demonstration than that, of the need for the sort of detailed interpretation of the **Phenomenology** in its own terms that I propose to offer. The “first part” of Hegel's system must be put back into its proper place; and it must be understood as the developmental logic of the concept of “truth” that it purport to be. For only then shall we understand properly any of Hegel.

*Work completed and to be done*

I began working on this project in 1983. A great deal of the basic spadework was done during a sabbatical leave (with an SSHRC [Social Sciences Humanities Research Council] Fellowship in 1985/6. Now (five years later) I have managed to go through the whole of Hegel's text and write the analysis, and the first draft for a commentary on each paragraph. Two fragments of this first draft have been published in French [“Les influences platoniciennes sur la théorie de la Vie et du Désir, dans la *Phénoménologie de l' Esprit* de Hegel”, *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 3, 1985, 84-94] and Spanish [“Literatura y Religion en la *Phenomenologia* de Hegel: El Alma Bella” *ER* (Sevilla) 7/8, Winter 1988/Spring 1989, 53-103], so the general pattern and a couple of widely separated samples of what is intended are available for inspection .....

I have only been able to write some parts of this Detailed Project Description on the basis of what I have already done. But the task of turning my rough draft into a **coherent** commentary is still an enormous one. Indeed, it is only now that I have a draft that I can see what the problems are. To turn what I have produced piecemeal, with frequent changes of mind and new insights, into two coherent volumes, will require an extended period of leisure. Quite apart from rendering my own interpretation as a consistent whole, and doing most of the **logical** work on transitions etc. that is spoken of in this “project statement” I need to survey the existing literature in greater detail if my hope of marking a new beginning are to be fulfilled. So I anticipate that each volume of this project will take about one full year to produce in a form fit for publication.

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